

# **NORTH CAROLINA FAMILY- CENTERED MEETINGS PROJECT**

**ANNUAL REPORT TO THE NORTH CAROLINA  
DIVISION OF SOCIAL SERVICES  
FISCAL YEAR 2002 – 2003**

## **SUMMARY AND PROJECTIONS**

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## SUMMARY AND PROJECTIONS

In 2002-2003, the North Carolina Family-Centered Meetings (NC-FCM) Project was initiated. To carry out the training, North Carolina State University was funded through a contract from the North Carolina Division of Social Services that is to be renewed for another two years. Ten North Carolina counties, selected as the pilots for a statewide child welfare reform called “multiple response system,” participated in the Project during the year.

### Multiple Response System

The NC-FCM Project is one component of the larger statewide training for a multiple response system (MRS). The goal of this reform is to treat families differentially on the basis of their situations. The multiple tracks permit focusing investigatory and legal resources on families that require this approach and using a family assessment and support approach with other families.

Involving families, whatever their track, in service planning is a key component of MRS. For this reason, Child and Family Team Meetings, Shared Parenting, and other inclusive family-agency meetings are part of the reform and are to be carried out within a framework of family-centered practice.

### Guiding Principles for Family-Centered Meetings

The aim of the NC-FCM Project is to promote family-centered practice that places children, their families, and their communities at the center of child welfare service planning. The underlying theory is that inclusive decision making advances the safety and well-being of children and other family members.

**The NC-FCM Project is part of a larger statewide effort to establish a multiple response system in North Carolina and, in particular, to place families at the center of child welfare service planning.**

The Project adopted the same six principles of family-centered practice upheld by all of the MRS training groups: everyone deserves respect, everyone has strengths, judgments can wait, partners share power, and partnership is a process. For the purpose of the NC-FCM Project, these were translated into principles for family-centered meetings. Its key principles for family-centered meetings stress that the workers maintain their dual role, that is, protecting children while helping families; focus on strengths-oriented, respectful, and safe interactions; and engage families in decision forums that are clear about purpose, process, action steps, and follow-up work.

Paralleling those for workers, the key principles for supervisors emphasize that they maintain their dual role, that is, overseeing practice and helping workers; model a strength-oriented and respectful approach; and engage workers in effective decision

making and achieving agency goals. Both workers and supervisors are encouraged to seek out feedback to enhance their and their organization's practice.

### **Practices Fitting Context**

The Project builds upon the North Carolina Family Group Conferencing Project previously carried out by North Carolina State University. In particular, the current training effort is grounded on the earlier project's philosophy and approach: articulating guiding principles, engaging key stakeholders in designing the training program, and encouraging self-reflective practice, all intended to foster respectful and effective implementation.

Although drawing upon the NC Family Group Conferencing Project, the aim of the NC-FCM Project is not to train counties in one specific model of involving families in child welfare decision making. North Carolina counties utilize a range of models—including Action Meetings, Family Unity Meetings, Team Decisionmaking, System of Care, and Family Group Conferencing—and this has generated some confusion on when to apply a family-involvement model.

In response, the NC-FCM Project provides training in a range of family-centered meetings practices and how to fit these to the context. For instance, an emergency placement may necessitate compressing the preparations for a meeting; in another instance, preparations may need to be extended because of indicators of domestic violence. Nevertheless, the guiding principles ensure that the training is carried out in a coherent and integrated manner within a framework of inclusive decision making.

**The NC-FCM Project builds on North Carolina State University's prior work with family group conferencing. It offers training in how to utilize family-centered meetings practices to fit particular family and service contexts.**

### **MRS Pilot County Descriptions**

During the year, the ten MRS pilot counties participating in the NC-FCM Project were as follows: Alamance, Bladen, Buncombe, Caldwell, Craven, Franklin, Guilford, Mecklenburg, Nash, and Transylvania. These pilot counties are broadly representative of the 100 counties in the state. Geographically, they span from the eastern to central to western regions of the state. Demographically, they range in size running from less to more populated counties and vary in their race/ethnicity composition. As a group, they have solid proportions of White, African-African, and Latino/Hispanic residents. Economically, the counties encompass higher and lower wealth counties, but the latter are more represented among the MRS pilot group. Seven of these counties exceed the overall state's rate of children below the poverty line.

**The ten MRS pilot counties are broadly representative of North Carolina counties in terms of their populations, economies, and child protection statistics.**

In terms of child protection statistics, the ten counties run the gamut of statewide rankings in investigative assessments (rankings from 14 up to 81) and child maltreatment substantiations (rankings from 9 up to 81). Not surprisingly, the three MRS pilots with the highest rates of investigations and substantiations in the county – Caldwell, Bladen, and Craven – also have relatively high unemployment rates.

### **County Assessments**

Congruent with a learner-centered philosophy of training, the NC-FCM Project sought guidance from the counties on designing the training program. In August and September 2002, interviews were held at each participating county Social Services, and a total of 79 county representatives were consulted. They included Social Services managers, supervisors, and front-line workers. These interviews were carried out in conjunction with another training group, Bringing It All Back Home Study Center. This collaboration helped to distinguish which pieces would be covered by which training team.

During the meetings, Social Service representatives were asked about their vision of the changes that they wished to effect through MRS, their plans on implementing MRS and specifically Child and Family Team Meetings, and their training strengths, needs, and preferences. The discussion covered both formal training events and follow-up training to reinforce learning and to facilitate its transfer to the workplace.

**Most of the MRS pilot counties expressed uncertainties about how to implement MRS but nevertheless wanted to move forward with this reform.**

At the time of the county assessments, most MRS pilot counties had not yet implemented Child and Family Team Meetings and expressed uncertainty about how to proceed. Nearly all the counties faced challenges in implementing MRS and more specifically Child and Family Team Meetings because of the lack of funding, time, facilitators, and resources. In addition, other county services, while generally favorable toward MRS, questioned whether it would keep children safe and whether they could take the time for participating in meetings. Despite these concerns about implementation in their agencies and communities, most counties were excited about initiating MRS which they viewed as potentially effective in improving family-agency relationships.

Counties asked to receive skills training on structuring and facilitating meetings, safety issues, and respecting cultural diversity. They especially requested that the training include family examples and demonstration of skills. All counties were receptive to the idea of transfer-of-learning activities such as coaching, co-facilitation, telephone consultation, listserv, and networking exchanges across counties.

**The MRS pilot counties asked for training in structuring and facilitating meetings with particular attention to culture and safety.**

## Training Development

The training curricula were structured to exemplify a framework of family-centered practice and to reflect theory on how adults learn and transfer learning to their work. This meant tailoring the training to what the participating counties identified as their strengths, needs, and interests; seeking feedback from participants on the training and its applicability to their work settings; and encouraging skill development over time as participants tried different approaches to including families in decision making.

In response to the county assessments, three formal training curricula were developed, tested, and refined over the year. They are intended to be taken consecutively with the later ones building on the earlier.

1. *Setting the Stage for Family-Centered Meetings*  
This one-day session orients county Social Services staff and their community partners to the purpose and structure of family-centered meetings.
2. *Facilitator Training for Family-Centered Meetings: Getting Started*  
This two-day workshop introduces facilitator skills for family-centered meetings.
3. *Facilitator Training for Family-Centered Meetings Sharpening Your Skills*  
This two-day workshop develops facilitator skills for meetings with challenging issues such as mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence.

**Modules were developed to orient counties to family-centered meetings and train workers in facilitating meetings.**

In addition, by-request training was initiated to provide on-going training to reinforce and develop further facilitation skills. Because this was a novel approach to training for many counties, training participants were reminded of this option at sessions and through follow-up emails.

## Training Implementation

After completing the county assessment and designing the curricula, training for the first training module, *Setting the Stage*, commenced in November 2002. The other two modules, *Getting Started* and *Sharpening Your Skills*, came on stream respectively in January 2003 and March 2003.

There were a total of 16 training events: 7 *Setting the Stage*, 4 *Getting Started*, and 5 *Sharpening Your Skills*. *Setting the Stage* was held in the Social Services' county, and the other two were mainly regional events with multiple counties participating.

**Over the year, 269 participants took part in training for family-centered meetings.**

For the three training modules, there were a total of 269 participants in 2002-2003. Among these, 215 were from county Social Services and 54 were from other county services. Nine of the ten counties participated in the formal training events. The tenth

county stated that because of its extensive experience with family-centered meetings, it was interested only in the by-request training.

By-request training carried out this year included responding to email or telephone inquiries on meeting facilitation and at the request of a county Social Services, demonstrating how to facilitate family-centered meetings.

### **Training Evaluation**

At the conclusion of each training event, a Participant Satisfaction Form was distributed. This standardized form had items on the training content, the trainers' effectiveness, the training facility and logistics, and the overall perception of the training. The feedback for all trainings was quite positive, with participants reporting strong levels of satisfaction.

Prior to the trainings, a large minority of participants expressed reservations about attending. This reflected difficulties in leaving work for training and uncertainties about implementing Child and Family Team Meetings. To the credit of the trainers, after the workshops, most said that they were glad that they had attended. To the question "Overall, how would you rate this session?", most participants circled "very high" or "high."

**Before the training events, a substantial minority of attendees were ambivalent about attending. After the training, most participants were glad that they had attended.**

The participants reported that they found the discussion about individual versus group work extremely relevant and applicable to their work and motivated them to view group work in a new way. They welcomed learning about specific group work skills including how to prepare for and facilitate meetings. And they appreciated the attention given to safety, culture, and the inclusion of children at meetings. Most all they liked that the trainings were creatively designed and engaged them in an exciting and informative learning process that was attuned to their capacities and interests. Those who took part in the by-request training found this very supportive of transferring the learning to their work with families.

**Follow-up training was a novelty, and counties needed to be oriented to making requests. Counties benefited from technical assistance on organizing meetings and co-facilitating meetings.**

### **Looking Ahead**

*Expansion of Training Program and Participating Counties.* Building upon the accomplishments in the first year of operation, the NC-FCM Project will expand its training program and participating counties in the coming two years. We will refine the current three training modules, develop an additional module on sustaining family-centered meetings, and increase delivery of by-request training. The Participant

Satisfaction Form, along with discussion with attendees before, during, and after sessions, provides feedback to enhance training components. The on-going involvement of the current ten MRS pilot counties will guide us on how to generate more advanced curricula congruent with their growth. The influx of new counties as they come on stream with MRS will help us to test our curricula with a broader range of participants, each with their own unique circumstances and cultures.

**Over the next two years, the NC-FCM will enhance its training program and expand its number of participating counties.**

*Development of Training Modalities and Materials.* The NC-FCM Project has utilized a range of training approaches, including didactic, interactional, experiential, and self-reflective. We will continue to foster an engaging learning context and support learning through developing training materials in written format and as funding permits, video format. The latter will be particularly helpful in offering visual examples of family-centered meeting processes and competencies. Our listserv, established this year, will be a vehicle for increasing communication with and among participants and offer another means of supporting family-centered-meeting facilitators, often working alone in their county.

*Assessing Participant Learning.* We will develop further our strategies for helping participants assess their learning and hone their skills. The Participant Satisfaction Form includes space for inserting curriculum specific items so that attendees can rate their own learning in these areas. Other strategies include designing exercises or simulations in which participants can practice facilitator skills and receive feedback, encouraging trainees to set goals for applying skills and assessing their attainment of these goals, offering opportunities for self-reflection during sessions, and coaching facilitators on how to organize and convene meetings and seek out evaluative feedback from family and professionals. For the last, a short evaluation form is provided to training participants. With the permission of counties, we plan to carry out focus groups separately with family members and service providers who have taken part in family-centered meetings. The intent is to gain their feedback on the meeting process and impact so that we can improve our training program and help counties improve their implementation of family-centered meetings. This year we carried out two such focus groups, and once we have more data will prepare a report of these findings in an aggregated form. The aim of all of these assessment strategies is to encourage self-reflective practice, that is, workers reflecting on their own practice to enhance their abilities and strengthen their commitment to helping children and their families.

**Various strategies will be utilized to help participants assess their learning and gain feedback during trainings and afterwards from families and colleagues.**

*Increasing Training Capacity.* Within North Carolina, our capacity in the next two years to offer effective and timely training will be heightened by our somewhat increased staffing. As we bring on new trainers, they will be able to work from a number of already



developed and tested curricula and accompanying trainer guides and materials. And they will be joining a cohesive and supportive Project team.

*Dissemination of Learning.* We will use a number of avenues for disseminating learning from the NC-FCM Project. These include materials posted on our webpage and listserv, presentations within and outside North Carolina, and publication of findings. We are taking part in a number of national discussions on curricula for family-centered practice, integration of systems of care, safety measures for family-involvement meetings, and key principles and practices for family group decision making. Through these forums, we can further exchange ideas and enrich our and others' thinking and practice.

*Stabilizing MRS and Family-Centered Meetings in North Carolina.* Any child welfare reform, including North Carolina's multiple response system, faces numerous challenges in funding, policy, implementation, and training. As one part of this reform, family-centered meetings share all of these challenges. In particular, the MRS pilot counties struggled with ways of introducing a new practice, staffing the meetings, encouraging the participation of county partners, explaining the process to families, and moving from individual to group practice. At the same time, there are a number of strong facilitators for overcoming these challenges to MRS and family-centered meetings:

- Federal child welfare reviews encouraging this new direction
- State legislation permitting the counties to pilot MRS
- County Social Services willing to pilot MRS
- Regular meetings and communications of state and county Social Services to work out MRS policies and procedures
- Well established and coordinated NC-DSS Children's Services training program
- Standardized participant satisfaction evaluation for child welfare training
- Training support from the National Child Welfare Resource Center on Family-Centered Practice and Annie E. Casey Foundation
- Collaboration among the four MRS training groups to deliver an integrated program to support family-centered practice
- Long-term experience of county DSS with a range of family-involvement models
- Prior training and evaluation by North Carolina State University in a family-involvement model called Family Group Conferencing
- Strong NC-FCM Project team at North Carolina State University
- Cultivation by NC-FCM Project team of linkages with diverse cultural communities
- Connection of NC-FCM Project team with national and international groups to promote family-centered practice

**While any child welfare reform faces many challenges, North Carolina's multiple response system has numerous resources to support and sustain it.**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Throughout this first year of the North Carolina Family-Centered Meetings Project, we have received tremendous support and guidance from individuals and groups committed to strengthening families and protecting the lives of children. We are proud to be part of a larger child welfare reform effort, Multiple Response System.

To start, we must express our gratitude to the families with whom we have shared time together, either from facilitating family meetings or to their participation in research to aid the project. You have taught us so much and we give you our thanks for your participation.

Our thanks is given to the workers directly involved in MRS implementation and facilitating meetings. You have taught us and continue to teach us important lessons about training, direct practice, and commitment to children and their families.

We appreciate the confidence that the North Carolina Division of Social Services, Children's Services has placed in us and the funding, guidance, and encouragement for carrying out the Project we have received over this year. We would like to especially recognize Chuck Harris, Rebecca Brigham, JoAnn Lamm, Tony Troop, David Atkinson, and Stoney Blevins for your insights, listening ear, and ongoing enthusiasm.

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